

BEHAVIORAL FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION¹

MICHAEL D. POWERS

NEWINGTON CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Increasingly, behavior analysts are becoming more aware that sophisticated, reliable, and effective technologies are often insufficient to bring about and maintain change in families. As our work has moved from highly controlled to applied settings, the effect on research and practice has been both expanded and complicated. Further, as Sarason (1981) noted, the theories of individual change that most human services professionals have been exposed to in their own training are insufficient for developing an adequate, coherent theory of systemic change. The challenge, then, becomes one of identifying a conceptual framework for understanding the process of change in families.

Arthur Robin and Sharon Foster have undertaken an enormous task by trying to address the fact that some behavioral interventions prescribed to treat parent-adolescent conflict are less than successful, or are outright failures. In their new book, *Negotiating Parent-Adolescent Conflict: A Behavioral Family Systems Approach*, they propose that clinicians enlarge the lens of behavior analysis by integrating theory and techniques from structural/strategic family therapy with cognitive behavior therapy and developmental considerations concerning adolescence.

Far from being a facile adaptation of techniques from one orientation to the theoretical framework of another, this book succeeds because it recognizes the differences inherent in family therapy, cognitive behavior therapy, and applied behavior analysis. It recognizes, but does not criticize, the strengths of each approach, and finds avenues to integrate

strengths of cognitive behavior therapy and applied behavior analysis with the strengths of family therapy. The authors' respect for the advantages and limitations of each approach is evident throughout the book. Moreover, their use of clinical examples to illustrate assessment, intervention, and evaluation elements of therapy is exemplary.

Robin and Foster are at once comprehensive and intellectually honest in their review of the empirical support for their interventions. Although they do present evidence that provides credible support for a behavioral family systems therapy, certain limitations exist. The theoretical orientation of this book is behavior analytic, although the techniques draw from applied behavior analysis, cognitive behavior therapy, and structural/strategic family therapy. It is not a book grounded in general systems theory. (It is no more correct to lump all types of family therapy together than it is to lump together all types of behavior therapy.) Further, it is noteworthy that the work of Bowen (intergenerational), the Milan group (in particular, the work of Selvini-Palazolli), and Ackerman (psychodynamic) is not included in Robin and Foster's scheme. Thus, this book represents a particular, albeit cohesive, view of the world of behavior therapy for troubled parents and adolescents.

This book aims to integrate behavior-analytic, cognitive-behavioral, and structural/strategic family therapy interventions. Attention to integration of the theory, assessment methodologies, and evaluation strategies of each is essentially absent. New terms are introduced here—ones that have clinical validity to be sure—but they are not subjected to the basic rules of behavior analysis. For example, the authors hypothesize that "Families are homeostatic systems" (p. 32); however, nowhere is a definition provided for "homeostasis" or for a "system." We are told of the "nature" of such

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Correspondence and requests for reprints should be addressed to Michael Powers, Newington Children's Hospital, 181 East Cedar Street, Newington, Connecticut 06111.

phenomena, but their defining features are not described. It would be unfair to hold the authors to a standard no one else has achieved and to expect definitions that parallel the ones they provide for reciprocity (pp. 25–26) or coercion (pp. 26–27). However, it would be beneficial to identify just what it is that makes these constructs so difficult to define.

Although I suspect many behavior therapists will find this book enlightening and of great value, I wager that they would conclude that the book misses a critical point: Behavior, communication, and interactions are not always assumed to be linear in family systems theory. By fitting structural family therapy techniques into a behavior-analytic theoretical model, the very system that gives rise to the family therapy techniques is violated. If we have learned anything from the “integrationists” (those attempting to integrate behavioral and psychodynamic therapy), it is that analyzing others’ techniques from one’s own theoretical position falls short. Robin and Foster acknowledge that additional work remains to be done in this area.

In my view, the real test is whether family sys-

tems phenomena such as triangulation, cross-generational coalitions, and cohesion can be measured validly and reliably using linear analysis, *and if not*, how well behavior analysts are able to adapt their assessment technology to nonlinear concepts. This work is still ahead. It is at once the most exciting and most troublesome task. Any shortcomings notwithstanding, this book is the very best one yet at expanding the lens of behavior therapy with parents and their adolescents. Robin and Foster tell us with remarkable clarity what we know about what we do, what we do not know, and what we should work hard to find out. What more could one ask? Only that this book be taken very seriously by behavior analysts and family therapists alike.

REFERENCE

- Sarason, S. B. (1981). *Psychology misdirected*. New York: Free Press.

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